

Prisoners of Hope

The Church of the Good Shepherd, Richmond

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 8:12–25

July 23, 2023

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I want to speak to you this morning about hope: about the God of hope, and about what it means to live with hope and expectation.

Hope is the unifying theme in our Epistle reading from Romans. Paul begins: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (v. 18). The entire creation, he continues, is waiting in tiptoe expectation for full revelation of God. God has subjected the entire creation to futility *in hope* — in other words, God has locked us up in order to set us free. We are prisoners of hope, until the fullness of time when God sets the entire creation free. And we have been saved in hope: hope in a reality that is hidden and can be perceived only with the eyes of faith:

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (vv. 24–25).

Hope is what makes life worth living. If you have hope, you can endure almost anything. Hope gives us resilience in the face of setbacks and enables us to meet life’s challenges with creativity. Conversely, hopelessness is a form of hell. You will remember that in Dante’s *Inferno*, at the entrance to hell, travelers see the words: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

What is hope? Christian hope is a gift from God, not a human quality. Ultimately, Christian hope is Jesus Christ. He is our hope: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Because Christ is risen from the dead, he has a future. Because we are in Christ, there is a future and a hope for us.¹ God is the source of our hope.

God creates hope for us by making promises. Hope is waiting for God to make good on his promises. Think for a minute about the difference between waiting for *something* and waiting for *someone*. Waiting for *something* is often impersonal or even transactional: for example, waiting for the package to arrive from Amazon; or waiting for traffic to move on I 95. Waiting for *someone* is personal and often based on a promise someone has made to you: Let’s get together. I will meet you at 7:00 at Starbucks. When someone makes you a promise, that promise opens up a future: you are waiting for the promise to be fulfilled. And even before the promise is fulfilled, waiting for the meeting affects you in the present. If it is someone you care about and look forward to seeing, then you think about the meeting; the anticipation becomes part of your present experience.

It is in God’s nature to make promises. He is the promise-making and promise-keeping God.

¹ Following Jürgen Moltmann, “Introduction: Essay on Hope,” *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, tr. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row), 15–36.

“See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

“I go to prepare a place for you ... I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3).

“I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).

By making promises, God creates a future and a hope for us. Faith believes that God is faithful to his promises. Hope waits for the fulfillment of God's promises. The Christian life is lived in hope and expectation.

Now at this point, a reality check is in order. Living with hope is unnatural. It is countercultural. To live with hope is to swim against the stream. For several reasons. First, experience teaches us to be suspicious about hope, to be cautious, even calculating, in order to avoid disappointment. People are notorious about making promises and breaking them. There is a good chance that at some point, your life has been shattered by someone's broken promise.

A second reason why hope is unnatural has to do with the aging process. When we are young, the future opens up before us with seemingly limitless possibilities. It is natural to make plans and to fantasize about the future. But at some point, we recognize that we have a lot more years behind us than we do ahead of us. At this point, the past and our memories may seem more real to us than the future.

Third, Christian hope is unnatural, because it is hope in what we cannot see. It is hope in a future that has not yet become concrete for us.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (vv. 24–25).

Christian hope is based completely on the trustworthiness of the living God, who makes promises and keeps them. For these reasons, then, hope persists when all the evidence indicates that the situation is hopeless. This quality of persistence is what Paul calls “hope against hope.” When the Lord promised Abraham that in his old age, he would have a son, Abraham hoped against hope, “believing that he would become the father of many nations” (Rom. 4:18).

The Christian life is full of contradictions. God has promised us eternal life, and yet everywhere we look, we see deterioration and decay, even in our own bodies. God has promised that Christ's death and resurrection have set us free from bondage to sin, and yet we see the effects of sin in our lives every day. Christian hope is born and grows in the roiling of life's contradictions. In the face of these contradictions, John Calvin asks, “What would become of us if we did not take our stand on hope... !”²

The paradox of Christian hope is that it occurs within the arena of suffering. This paradox explains a surprising feature of Paul's witness to Christian hope: he begins with the experience of suffering:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us (v. 18).

Notice how differently God's hope comes to us, in contrast to hope that we can conjure or evoke. Imagine that someone you love is feeling hopeless. How would you instill hope in the person? You might say something like: This will get better. You might point out places where the person can go for help or people who have experienced hardship and are now doing great. All of these attempts to instill hope can have value. But all of them rely on the conditions of this world. And all of them seek to direct attention away from the experience of suffering itself. Christian hope comes to us differently. God invites us to see our sufferings as a sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. God promises that as we suffer, the Lord himself draws near to us. Christ is never closer to us than when we are hurting. It is in our experiences of suffering that Christian hope is born. It is in the darkness that the light of hope shines.

I have been speaking about the God dimension of Christian hope: Christ is our hope. God creates hope by making promises and inviting us to wait for him to fulfill them. But we have a part to play in the arena of hope. Christian hope calls forth action from us. The hope that comes from God is a source of energy that flows from him to us, energy that propels us forward into his future. Every day is full of possibilities that God has created for us. We are to live as people of hope, people of expectation, because "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (v. 19).

Because hope is God's will for us, we are called to turn away from hopelessness and despair. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has opened new possibilities for us. How can we stand idle or indulge in tristesse, world-weariness, and sloth – what the Medieval writers referred to as *accidie*: loss of interest in life? In Christ, we are a new creation. How can we act as if nothing has changed? If our hope flags, we can pray for the gift of hope. We can ask God to wake us up, to open our eyes. and to show us the possibilities that God has created for us each day.

The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of hope. It is clear to me that God's Spirit is alive and present here at Good Shepherd. I see all kinds of signs that the Holy Spirit is at work here: in the way that you worship; in the connectedness that you have with each other; in the ways that you serve Christ in the various ministries here. His service is perfect freedom. There is no greater satisfaction for a former rector returning to the place where we shared ministry than to see how you have grown in the depth of your love, in the extent of your service, and in the incorporation of new members in the congregation. Clearly, the Spirit of God is at work here.

But really, the fact that I see these signs of the Spirit's presence among you is not what matters. What matters is that God sees the Spirit at work as he looks at us this morning. What matters is God's promise to fill you with the Spirit, a promise he made to you in baptism: "Sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." His Spirit is an inexhaustible source of hope. So I leave you with Paul's prayer:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13).

² “To us is given the promise of eternal life — but to us, the dead. A blessed resurrection is proclaimed to us — meantime we are surrounded by decay. We are called righteous — and yet sin lives in us. We hear of ineffable blessedness — but meantime we are here oppressed by infinite misery. We are promised abundance of all good things — yet we are rich only in hunger and thirst. What would become of us if we did not take our stand on hope, and if our heart did not hasten beyond this world through the mist of the darkness upon the path illumined by the word and Spirit of God!” (on Heb. 11:1), quoted in Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18–19.